

African Spirituality's Influence on the Slave Experience in America

Introduction:**Nat Turner and the Fear of African Spirituality**

On the warm late summer night of August 21, 1831 Nat Turner embarked on a bloody crusade of insurrection and freedom which descended upon Southampton County, Virginia and the plantation owned by Joseph Travis. Turner was born into American enslavement in 1800 and had later been purchased by Mr. Travis, a craftsman who Nat Turner vehemently despised. Believing he had been directed to his mission through spiritual command and intervention, Turner proclaimed himself to be the savior of his people and proceeded to gather and recruit members of Mr. Travis' plantation as well as those adjacent to the Travis estate. As Nat Turner seethed with hatred for his owner, he regressed within himself in the weeks leading up to that fateful night, conjuring his determined mission through visions, omens, and signs.¹ Inspired by a spiritual fervor which was imparted to him via his mother who was captured and brought to America from Africa, Nat Turner believed that he had been specifically ordained to obtain his freedom through the slaughtering of any white person who came into his path.

Nat Turner's march through Southampton County began following an eclipse of the sun which was taken as a sign from God that what he was embarking on was divinely directed. Flanked by four others, Nat Turner approached the Travis family late into the night and murdered them all. With his mission not yet quenched or completed, over the next two days

¹John B. Duff, Peter M. Mitchell, *The Nat Turner Rebellion; The Historical Event and the Modern Controversy* (New York, San Francisco, London, Harpers & Row, 1971) 17.

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Turner and his small army went from plantation to plantation killing over sixty white men, women, and children. As his pursuit continued, Nat Turner was able to successfully recruit some sixteen others who were willing to follow the self-proclaimed Black Messiah in his bloodthirsty quest for freedom. Akin to a religious jihad, Nat Turner and his followers both shocked and impressively frightened the white community of Southampton County, Virginia placing the entire nation on edge. On August 23 the bloodshed ceased, yet Nat Turner was able to remain elusive from capture for the next six weeks.

After Nat Turner's apprehension the country clamored for his swift execution as those who joined him in his mission were all tried and put to death. With the insurrection still firmly entrenched into the minds of the survivors, Nat Turner was placed on trial and executed on November 11, 1831. While the impact of the uprising penetrated deeply within the core of white America, it was the source of the rebellion, as expressed by John Wesley Cromwell which spoke to the primal fears that slaveholders carried with them during the afterward.² In his account of the immediate aftermath Cromwell noted:

A reign of terror followed in Virginia. Labor was paralyzed, plantations abandoned, women and children were driven from home and crowded in nooks and corners. The sufferings of many were intense. Retaliation began.

Slaveholders, overseers, and missionaries had dedicated nearly two centuries to the attempted conversion of enslaved Africans to Christianity. Yet, for as determined as their drive seemed to be, resistance to total conversion permeated throughout many of the plantations of colonial and eventually antebellum Lowcountry America. Christianity, it seemed, had failed to successfully push enslaved Africans into the area of compliance despite their status as being

² John W. Cromwell "*The Aftermath of Nat Turner's Insurrection*"; in *Journal of Negro History* 5 (April, 1920) 212.

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nothing more than chattel. For the first century and a half of the slave experience in America, there was but a small number of enslaved Africans who were converted to Christianity, let alone received a significant amount of Christian instruction and knowledge about the religion.³ Scores of Africans who were captured and placed aboard the many ships awaiting departure from the coast of West Africa were not capable of carrying any tangible item or relic with them during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. With no physical items to remind them of the freedom they once shared on the continent, the African slave managed still to carry the one item that could not be stolen or left behind, their spiritual identification.

Invariably, Nat Turner must have believed that Christianity in America was the white man's religion. Although his mother and countless other enslaved Africans might have had familiarity with Christianity, the glaring hypocrisies still loomed. In African spirituality represented a oneness of self, in communion with the earth, the gods who nurtured and maintenance the land and the peoples and societies who converged to foster and populate their respective beliefs. Christianity was perceived as a European religion, perpetrated as a saving grace for a people who were identified as heathens in need of religious redemption. Nat Turner's insurrection underscored the difference between European religion and African spirituality and alerted the country to the reality that enslaved Africans were not willing to circumvent their spiritual identification, even as they faced down the prospect of death in pursuit of freedom. African spirituality represented so much more to the enslaved African. It is my aim to uncover the reasons why.

³ Jason Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery*. (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press) 71.

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Indeed, a full book would be needed in order to illustrate the various African societies and their separate religions in totality. African spirituality, quite like the continent itself, is one of the most capacious and diverse networks of religious beliefs in the history of mankind. It is not my stated declaration to delve into the innermost workings, teachings and histories of the exceedingly multifaceted construction of African spirituality. Many historians have dedicated untold numbers of years to this study. While some might argue that the interpretation and analysis of what various Africans practiced has been disseminated through European scholarship, one cannot truthfully dismiss or ignore the encompassing impact that African faith had upon the inhabitants of the birthplace of civilization.

Peculiar as it may be, the very concept of African spirituality and spiritual identification transcends beyond the continent of Africa as well as the range of immediate persons who have been influenced by its particular precepts. However, the idea of spirituality in Africa may not automatically register the same relationship that could be associated with religion. Africans have shared in an approximation, a closeness to their particular faith and beliefs which often times have moved past the conceptions of religion. For the sake of this essay, the abstractness of African spirituality will not be addressed in its entirety. The reasoning for this is because the cultural, political, economic, and personal influences of African spirituality were truly diverse.

One way to frame African spirituality on the continent is through the examination of its overarching importance. Prior to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the spiritual connectedness which flourished through the various portions of African society was marked and counted through personal interactions. African spirituality could be viewed as non-traditional, that is

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universally structured or functional in the same manner as Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. In fact, each religion is unique to the people among who it emerged.⁴

African spirituality addressed different concerns in this life—health, wealth, security, etc. Salvation, which was expected to be evident in the ability to become a “good ancestor” was believed to derive from good morality during one’s existence. Principle architects or founders of a universal religion did not exist throughout most of Africa. Except for Islam, the universality that would later come to define Western religion was almost non-existent. Prior to the Catholic arrival in places like the Kongo, there was no need for missionaries to make known the virtues of Christianity. Whether it was the Yoruba of Nigeria, the people of Madagascar, or the Bangwa of Cameroon, African spirituality represented both an all-important and yet interestingly broad dichotomy of beliefs throughout all corners of the continent.

Before continuing, it is essential to note that there are thousands of religions and spiritual sects in Africa and it would be a monumental task to list them all and supply the important attributes to each one. Also, there are two problematic aspects in the classifying of what is traditionally known as the religions of the world which often devalues the significance of African spirituality. The first problem is the concept of “redemptive religion.” Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all preach, to variant degrees depending upon the respective religion, the idea that there is one God, one Savior, and that only through this one Savior (and thus that particular religion) can one truly be saved. The vast majority of people today ascribe to one of these three religions which ultimately overshadows and thereby disposes of non-traditional African religious and spiritual beliefs. The second problem is the inaccurate and subsequently misnomer production of the term “African Traditional Religion”. Eurocentric relabeling of African religions and spiritual

⁴ John S. Mbiti *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York, Praeger, 1969) 5.

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groups has for centuries helped to undermine the cultural significance of these groups. While widespread attitudes which suggested that Africa donated nothing of substance to the outside world has taken a precipitous drop over the last half century, the reliance upon Eurocentric anthropological discoveries to assist in telling the whole story of Africa is still an ever-challenging battle.

Some scholars have even claimed that Africa was the nurturing point of some world civilizations. At any rate, it is difficult to ignore Africa's place in the evolution of what would become known as universal civilizations.⁵ The centrality of African spirituality holds a value that should undoubtedly be recognized and appreciated in the same manner as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. One of the most glaring complications in understanding the influence of African spirituality is the perception of Christianity. Christianity was viewed as the saving grace to a people who were seen as sinful, backward heathens. Without the necessity of a protracted missionary sent by European powers to preach the gospel, Africans for millenniums had cultivated their own spiritual beliefs which one could argue certainly mirrored anything that was coming from Greece, Rome, Great Britain or elsewhere. Africans were anything but sinful, backward heathens. The sheer fact that European Christians proscribed themselves as being the saviors of all mankind and yet failing to comprehend the complexities of African religions and spirituality is a testament to the narrow-mindedness that would clamp down upon the institution of slavery in respect to enslaved Africans and their association with religion.

⁵ Ibid., 9.

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Dominique Zahan noted that in the African religious universe, the Supreme Being was central.⁶ As the enslaved African was stolen from their homes, their families, and their literal sense of freedom, and sold into European-American slavery, the Supreme Being was virtually the only being that they could truly rely upon. In the Americas, they would find a religion fundamentally opposite of what they knew. Indeed, while some enslaved Africans were already converted to Christianity or had become familiar with some of the principals of Christianity, for a vast majority of enslaved Africans, their first introduction to what Nat Turner concluded was the “white man’s religion” would be an inauspicious one at best, a brutal one at worse. And yet as the enslaved African arrived on the Atlantic coast of the New World, it would be their spiritual identification which would forge common bonds, become a beacon of hope in the most desperate and dismal of times, and above all, would set the foundation for the quest for liberation through rebellions, uprisings, and insurrections.

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They know that if they would encourage their [slaves] conversion they must allow them some reasonable time for their instruction; and this would consequently be a hindrance to their work and an abatement of the Master’s. And this is not openly owned and avowed to be the cause of that...yet I may venture to say ‘tis so at the bottom. Nor can some of them forbear to speak out their minds, though they endeavor to justify and excuse themselves by pretending that the slaves (the Negroes especially) are a wicked stubborn race of men and can never be converted, tho to gull and deceive their Masters they may put on the air and appearance of religion.⁷

---South Carolina Clergy to Gideon Johnston,

March 4, 1712

⁶ Dominique Zahan, “Some Reflections on African Spirituality”; in *African Spirituality*, ed. Jacob Olupá (New York, Crossroad, 2000) xix; 7.

⁷Margaret W. Creel *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community-Culture Among the Gullahs*. The American Social Experience Series. Vol. 7. (New York: New York University Press., 1988) 69.

Christianity is such an exalted staple of American life that for many it would be difficult to present the religion of Jesus Christ in a disparaging light. Millions of people identify Christianity as their religious choice and readily subscribe to virtually all of its tenants, practices and of course, written text. The King James Bible stands as the one true book from God, divinely inspired and thus written by equally divinely inspired men over a millennium and a half ago. Often described as “The Good Book”, “The Book of Books” and the “Book of Peace”, the Bible and Christianity itself has served as the standard-bearer of the three “redemption-religions” to the known world.

It must be stated however, that to the practitioners of American slavery, Christianity was often times nothing more than just the vehicle through which over three-hundred years of racially motivated enslavement and bondage was manifested. Christianity, quite honestly, could have been Islam if Europeans had decided that Islam would have been their source of inspiration. Monarchies (both European and African), captors, ship captains, buyers, sellers, slave owners, overseers, southern business owners, and of course missionaries all had a stake in the continuous flow of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Yet the questions that remain are both why and how Christianity has had such an overwhelming impact on the generations of slaves in the United States? Many have attempted to answer those questions. And while some theories have been more circumspect and albeit reasonable than others, the pressing question has rarely been asked.

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Contrary to beliefs shared by persons such as Rev. Charles Colcock Jones⁸ Christianity was not as influential to the slave experience in both colonial and later antebellum America as compared to African spirituality. The truth is that the majority of enslaved Africans did not convert to Christianity in any abundant manner until the years directly preceding the Civil War. While Christianity was most certainly used as a force to deepen the belief that enslavement was to be rationalized through a Christian charge⁹, the religion itself was not as dominating. Missionaries in the Lowcountry region and enslaved Africans would have a contentious relationship due in part to many slave master's prohibition of religious teachings because they believed it would promote rebellions.¹⁰ Notwithstanding, in South Carolina during the eighteenth century, efforts to "Christianize" Africans were primarily endeavored in Charleston and other settled plantation areas.¹¹ So if Christianity's role in the lives of enslaved Africans was not as prevalent as has been constructed, what was? The answer: African Spirituality.

To understand the importance of African spirituality in respect to the slave experience in America, one need only to realize two significant points. The first is diversity. Obviously not every African who was enslaved was taken from the same region or closely neighboring areas. As it has been well documented, slavers cared little about where slaves originated from. The end game was to acquire as many Africans as possible with the least resistance and loss. With that being the case, those who survived the Middle Passage were usually privy to their own particular language and religious beliefs, though at times a person may have known the language of another tribe and been familiar with the religious and spiritual practices or beliefs of others. The second

⁸ Charles Colcock Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States*. (New York, Negro Universities Press., 1842; 1969) 197.

⁹ Thomas Weber *Deep Like the Rivers: Education in the Slave Quarter Community, 1831-1865* (New York, Norton, 1978) 2.

¹⁰ Young, *Rituals* p. 71.

¹¹ Creel, *Peculiar People* p. 68.

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point is a lack of familiarity. Indeed, as stated previously, some Africans on the continent were knowledgeable about Christianity. This is especially true as it concerns the Kongolese who were baptized and converted to Catholicism. Yet a lack of familiarity is critical when attempting to convert a people who do not speak the language of the missionaries. Albert H. Stoddard relayed this point in saying the following:

Taking such a conglomeration, totally ignorant by all our standards, and thrusting them into a sphere so different as to amount to almost another world, two principal things happened. In the first place, and in common with any immigrant, they had to learn to speak English. It was necessary to teach them as soon as possible so they could understand orders and instructions... When they had acquired a sufficient grasp of English to understand orders they were then left to themselves as to speech.¹²

The “breaking period” of slave emigration was not resoundingly met with compliance or obedience. It must be understood that even though European slavers tapped into a preexisting slave network, the system of slavery operated differently in Africa as opposed to the Americas. For many free Africans therefore, while they may have known of or even witnessed African enslavement, once they themselves were captured, the reality of enslavement was wildly different than anything experienced in Africa. To be captured, shackled, placed upon a ship, and after up to three months finally arrive on an unknown land and look upon the faces of persons who were so unfamiliar and wicked must have been the worst experiences they could have. To then be “broken” and forced to learn a language that was just as foreign as another African language might have contributed to the determination to rebel. In fact, forced emigration was routinely met with African resistance at every turn.¹³

¹² Albert H. Stoddard, “*Origin, Dialect, Beliefs, and Characteristics of the Negro of the South Carolina and Georgia Coasts*”; in *Georgia Historical Quarterly* Vol. 28, No. 3, September 1944, 187.

¹³ John W. Blassingame *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. (New York: Oxford University Press., 1972) 7.

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As enslaved Africans resisted, rebelled and refused, they began to turn inward to their spiritual connectedness and identities. By reverting back to their spiritual roots, they could form bonds with the Supreme Being, the Creator of All and seek the refuge and protection they most desperately were in need of. In some instances, certain African spiritual identities were shared among others, whether or not they belonged to the same group. There was a sacredness within the confines of African spirituality which could not or would not be obtained through European-American Christianity. The similar experiences of slavery became a catalyst for the need to share religious and spiritual beliefs.

For many slavers, religion was the least of their concerns.¹⁴ So long as they retained the ability to purchase slaves and maintain a plantation, many planters were not the most interested in the religious lives of their slaves. The only time it would seem that a slaver's ire could be heightened is if it were discovered that their slaves were using African religions or more specifically Christianity as a means to rebel. Slaves early on identified this and began to formulate ways to use their spiritual beliefs to not only relieve some of the atrocities of slavery, but to also manipulate Christianity.

An interesting factor that both planters and missionaries failed to realize is that while in their native lands, enslaved Africans, as author Jason Young puts it, "not only received a cultural and religious inheritance from Africa but also actively engaged in the process of putting Africa to use in their own lives."¹⁵ Maintaining a spiritual identity was one of the most important activities that enslaved Africans could do. However, more was required if they were to navigate through their lives as enslaved humans who were only to be considered property. The

¹⁴ Creel, *Peculiar*, 69.

¹⁵ Young, *Rituals*, 81.

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desideratum was to firmly place Africa into their very lives in order to develop a means to transmit and discover their own salvation. As it would turn out, the enslaved African would create for themselves an elaborate structure built upon their various religious and spiritual beliefs and forged by their commitment to freedom. From their spiritual connectedness, the enslaved African would understand God better, even while the slave master and missionary both concluded they had no knowledge of who God was.

As stated previously African spirituality represented a connectedness that could not be related to by the slave master or the missionary. In many ways, the composition of missionary's thoughts concluded that they were actually doing Africans a favor. When conversion attempts were made, they were gestures often with a backdrop of demeaning consciousness. The enslaved African not only had a personal relationship with God, but in different ways their relationships were more deeply rooted than some Christian missionaries. One of the main reasons why missionaries earlier on decided that full scale conversions were not as successful as they had originally anticipated was because of the immeasurable devotion to their respective spiritual beliefs that Africans retained and brought with them to America. The slaver's encouragement to Christian conversion and worship depended largely on his own pious behaviors. Within this paradigm, enslaved Africans created communities, and while not necessarily sharing the same cultural background or religion, still connected within the compass of spirituality. To conclude this section, as author Clifton Johnson pointedly explained, "The antebellum Negro was not converted to God. He converted god to himself."¹⁶

¹⁶ Clifton Johnson, *God Struck Me Dead; Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Ex-Slaves*. (Philadelphia, Pilgrim Press, 1969) ix.

Religion and Rebellion

"I finally got religion, and it was Aunt Jane's praying and singing them old Virginia hymns that helped me so much. Aunt Jane's marster would let her come to see me sometimes, but not often. Sometimes she would slip away from her place at night and come to see me anyhow. She would hold prayer-meeting in my house whenever she would come to see me."

"Would your marster allow you to hold prayer-meeting on his place?"

"No, my child; if old marster heard us singing and praying he would come out and make us stop. One time, I remember, we all were having a prayer-meeting in my cabin, and marster came up to the door and hollered out, 'You, Charlotte, what's all that fuss in there?' We all had to hush up for that night. I was so afraid old marster would see Aunt Jane. I knew Aunt Jane would have to suffer if her white people knew she was off at night. Marster used to say God was tired of us all hollering to him at night."¹⁷

In *Roll, Jordan, Roll* Eugene Genovese analyzed the institution of Christianity and how its relationship with the enslaved African affected their consciousness and ideologies. Suggesting that the Christian religion produced a spirit of passivity and submissiveness, Genovese surmised that the Christian religion, "softened the slaves by drawing the hatred from their souls, and without hatred there could be no revolt."¹⁸ Indeed, there were enslaved Africans who saw Christianity as the religion of the redeemed and who believed that the only way to live a righteous life and thereby one day "see the face of God" was through the conversion, belief, and practice of the slave master's religion. Yet, for just as many enslaved Africans who subscribed to this ideology, there were just as many, if not more, who either turned to Christianity for manipulative and exploitative purposes or refused to accept Christianity altogether.

It is important to keep in mind that for the enslaved African, the familiarity with the Christian faith may have varied from slave owner or plantation. Depending largely upon whether or not the slave owner was a pious individual, the enslaved African may have received religious instruction or may have been prohibited from any Christian training up to and including being

¹⁷Albert Octavia V. Rogers, *The House of Bondage, or, Charlotte Brooks and other Slaves. Black Women Writers.* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1890; 1891) 11.

¹⁸ Eugene Genovese *Roll, Jordan, Roll; The World the Slaves Made.* (New York: Pantheon Books.) 163-64.

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able to attend Sunday church services. On its own, the Bible was a conspicuous entity in the relationship between enslaved and Christianity. Fearing the possibility that the Bible may in some way incite their slaves into either passive resistance or worse, many planters directly forbade the Bible from being present on their plantations. The Bible could be viewed as a live weapon. In the right hands, it could manipulate and exacerbate the institution of slavery and promote the idea that, as William Wells Brown mentioned in his narrative *My Southern Home* when speaking about a pastor, Mr. Mason, “if you bear it patiently, and leave your cause in the hands of God, he will reward you for it in heaven, and the punishment you suffer.”¹⁹

This ideology was neither foreign to nor controversial among almost all of the southern planters or missionaries who used Christianity in general and the Bible in specific to foster a defense for the creation and implementation of slavery. Many slave narratives spoke to the idea that Christianity was ordained to release the enslaved African from a life of spiritual bondage all while they remained in perpetual physical serfdom. The hypocrisy was to be covered through elaborate mixed messages masqueraded as sermons in order to sustain docility and keep the prospect of rebellions and insurrections held in check. Former slave Lunsford Lane, writing in his own narrative, illustrated the manipulation of Christianity and religion as practiced by ministers who cherry-picked particular scriptures. In his narration Lane said the following,

“I often heard select portions of the scriptures read... There was one very kind hearted Episcopal minister whom I often used to hear; he was very popular with the colored people. But after he had preached a sermon to us in which he argued from the Bible that it was the will of heaven from all eternity we should be slaves, and our masters be our owners, most of us left him; for like some of the faint hearted disciples in early times we said,--"This is a hard saying, who can bear it?"²⁰

¹⁹ William Wells Brown, *My Southern Home: Or, the South and its People*. (Boston: A.G. Brown 1880) 15-16.

²⁰ Lane, Lunsford *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, N.C.* Second ed. (Boston, Printed for the publisher: J.G. Torrey, printer, 1842) 21.

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The deliberate and perverted manipulation of the Bible, scriptures, and Christianity by all parties involved in order to subjugate millions of enslaved Africans is a stark testament to the orchestration of religious control. As enslaved African were brought to American shores Christian beliefs stood in contrast to their spiritual identities. One of the best modes to break a person's will in order to obtain their obedience is to displace their spiritual foundations. Once broken, rhetoric such as the aforementioned quote becomes more easily digested. While certainly both the aesthetic and theoretical expressions of American slavery being pardoned derived from the unconscious manifestation of superior Christianity beliefs, it registered only but to a small amount of enslaved Africans. As mentioned above, these instances depended on the opportunity to have manipulated Christianity in the right hands, in this case, Western ethnocentrism. In the wrong hands, as slave owners and missionaries both feared, African spirituality could not only pierce but invade the tenants of Christianity in order to exploit it for the benefit of the enslaved African.

African spirituality's influence not only on the slave experience in America but also Christianity is one of the most neglected narratives in this country's history. As mentioned previously, for the first century and a half of American slavery, the enslaved African did not come by Christianity in such a profound way as to have been converted in great numbers. As it was, once Christianity was able to reach into the plantation fields and homes where enslaved Africans worked and served, it had another hurdle to surmount, that being actual conversion. For the enslaved African, conversion to Christianity presented several challenges which needed to be addressed, yet seldom were. For starters, many were not permitted to hold their own services. If a newly converted slave wanted to learn more about Christianity, his or her only means of receiving the teachings of their new religion might have been to attend church services with

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whites who, by consequence, forbade them to sit together. Some plantations were more lenient yet routinely enslaved Africans were only permitted to obtain Christian religion under certain strict provisions. Acquiescing to these rules only increased the necessity to forge a common bond between respective African religion and Christianity.

If Christianity were to be accepted by the enslaved African, it first needed to attend to certain pressing concerns. To begin, Christianity needed to address the concept of enslavement. Writing in his own narrative, Friday Jones remembered a promise he made to God as a young boy, “I promised God I would seek my soul's salvation when I got to be a man...”²¹ The pretense of Christianity was that only through the acceptance of Jesus Christ would one be able to acquire true salvation. Yet this stood opposite the condition of the enslaved, as he or she was well aware of their real fate. Accepting Jesus Christ did not end their bondage. Personal salvation for many enslaved Africans only came through death. Christianity’s great paradox therefore became the difference between white Christians and slave Christians. To summarize the hypocrisy that blurred the line between the two, Frederick Douglass wrote,

Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference... We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cow skin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus... He sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity... We have men sold to build churches, women sold to support the gospel, and babes sold to purchase Bibles for the poor heathen! All for the glory of God and the good of the souls!”²²

Here, Frederick Douglass did not fail to magnificently articulate the asymmetry between white and slave Christianity. The aberration was definite. As enslaved Africans began to explore Christianity they had to understand that the religion for whites could not be the same for them.

²¹Friday Jones, “*Days of Bondage: Autobiography of Friday Jones Being a Brief Narrative of his Trials and Tribulations in Slavery*”; in Academic Affairs Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill [database online]. [Chapel Hill, N.C.], 1999) 1.

²² Frederick Douglass *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (New York, Chelsea House, 1988) 75-6.

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And it would be through this understanding that they could formulate their own interpretations while maneuvering through the web of dogma Christianity.

One of the most fascinating ways in which the enslaved African incorporated their respective spiritual identities into European-American Christianity was the “invisible institution.” The enslaved African became very resourceful in ensuring they had an opportunity to worship without impediment or worse. For this purpose, they waited until nightfall and slipped away deep into the woods to pray, sing, and preach. What developed from the souls of enslaved Africans during their late night worship services was the ritual.

Rituals were known for their worship through song and dance as enslaved Africans expressed themselves in ways that were forbidden on the plantation. In communing with God, the Supreme Being, the ritual would evoke some of the most enthusiastically high charged expressions of emotions to be had by those in attendance. In *Journal of Negro History*, John B. Cade gave voice to the perils which befell enslaved Africans seeking to steal away in order to worship in secret. One account was given by M. J. Jones of Minden, Louisiana who was quoting Hannah Lowery: “When they wanted to sing and pray, they would steal off into the woods. During that time, most of the masters were cruel. If they would hear them (slaves) singing, they would get their whips and whip them all the way home.”²³

Yet, as a Mrs. Channel gave her account of another plantation in Louisiana, enslaved Africans would not be stopped in their mission to worship:

...religious services among the slaves were strictly forbidden. But the slaves would steal away into the woods at night and hold services. They would form a circle on their knees around the speaker who would also be on his knees. He would bend forward and speak into or over a vessel

²³ J.B. Cade “*Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves*”; in *Journal of Negro History*, July 1935. 229.

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of water to drown the sound. If anyone became animated and cried out, the others would quickly stop the noise by placing their hands over the offender's mouth.²⁴

Enslaved Africans faced a tumultuous danger by assembling in order to worship and seek the guidance of the Supreme Being, the Creator of the world and the one whom they believed was more powerful than the slave master. The "ring shout", as these praise and worship services would also be known, were often times more than just a gathering of bodies to seek comfort and a few moments of relief from their otherwise base lives of enslavement. Ironically, these religious services also offered another valuable component to the enslaved African's life which posed an even more ominous danger if discovered by the slave master: The rebellion plot.

It was no secret that for many enslaved on the plantation fields of any Southern slave-holding state that communications were given not only through day-to-day conversations, but also through song. For the slaves who toiled on large plantations which warehoused dozens of slaves, communication was of the most vital importance. Indeed, some plantation owners did not have direct communication with the enslaved in the field, and it was there that a great amount of communication proceeded to take place. During the songs, slaves would directly or indirectly speak against the atrocities of the institution of slavery, the ones who oversaw this institution and those responsible for carrying out its operation. More than that, enslaved Africans would also talk to God, through song, relishing in the possibility of one day being free, even if it only came through death. As these songs and prayers were transplanted into the "ring shout" religious services, the added dimension of insurrection plots were conspired and in some instances, carried out.

²⁴ Ibid., 331.

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That enslaved Africans were ingenious enough to take a religion that was being all but forced upon them and manipulate it in order to help service their spiritual necessities as well as to give birth to ideas of uprisings, rebellions, and insurrections speaks volumes to the spirit of every enslaved member who took these measures. Daunting as it were, many a slave plot, whether carried out, cancelled, or in some tragic instances, exposed, covertly used Christianity in concert with the aspirations of the enslaved. There are dozens of rebellions and insurrections which occurred throughout the period of American slavery up to emancipation, most notably Gabriel Prosser (1800), Nat Turner (1831) and John Brown (1859). However, an untold number of others were presumably constructed and organized, even if only for the moment during the “ring shout” religious services.

One of the less fantastical slave revolts was planned for Easter Sunday, 1802 in Virginia, a mere year and a half after the infamous Prosser slave revolts of late 1800. The Easter Sunday insurrection commenced as reportedly “80 slaves met in a field near Norfolk and planned to fire the city and kill the white people.”²⁵ The conspirator of the plot was a man by the name of Ben who, according to records, was owned by Mr. Philemon Bird of King and Queen County. Ben was captured the next day and was subsequently hanged on June 1, 1802. While documents ascertained afterward fail to clarify whether the plot was aspired upon during a religious service, the argument can be made that Ben and the other eighty co-conspirators may have come to this plot by-way of a religious gathering.

As it were, slave revolts, plots, insurrections, and uprisings were more or less a fixture in religious services as this was one of the few times that slaves were able to gather under the stars,

²⁵ Joseph Cephas Carroll, *Slave Insurrections in the United States, 1800-1865* (New York, Negro Universities Press, 1938); Archives of Virginia, Executive Papers (January 25-June 1, 1802) 1.

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as one with the Supreme Being and fully question their position in life. Christianity mixed with African spirituality in a hybrid which awakened the spirits from the past, the spirits of the ancestors from the continent and sparked the sense of freedom that was snatched away as they were shackled and forced into ships bound for the Americas. While white planters, missionaries and the like all gathered on Sunday mornings in a display of self-gratify European chauvinism, as essayist Caryl Phillips denoted, enslaved Africans slipped away to the recesses of fields and woods to create a sense of hope.²⁶

African spirituality's influence on the slave experience in America pushed against Christianity's power in ways that the master class was not aware of. The pious slave master and the would-be charitable missionary were only as well-meaning and Godly as their imaginations would dictate. To invoke the spirit of God upon a race of people who were to be in bondage for life was not only one of the most blatant examples of hypocrisy but also a massive sin. The enslaved African recognized this and either converted out of an appreciation to the religion of Christianity that even the slave master themselves could never obtain, or in many instances completely dismissed it. The full influence of African spirituality on the slave experience lies nestled between the want for freedom and the prospect of death. Both bookends were the constant reminders that for the enslaved African, other than themselves, all they had was their spiritual identities. The fact that from their integrating of Christianity with their respective spiritual connectedness evolved hope and a desired sense of liberation is a testament to the persevering spirit of every enslaved African who ever had to spend one day as property of a white planter. In this, African spirituality took one more turn as it cemented itself into the lives of enslaved Africans: conjuring and Hoodoo.

²⁶ Caryl Phillips, *The European tribe*. (London; Boston: Faber and Faber) 121.

Conjuring, Hoodoo

And the Counter to Christianity

The final section of this essay is divided into two distinct, yet equally important themes. The first will consist of a brief discussion on the influence that conjuring had within the slave community of South Carolina and Georgia throughout the slave experience in America. The second portion will discuss the religion known as Hoodoo and how it became the counter to European-American Christianity.

The Latin word for conjure is *conjurare* which is defined as “banning together by an oath or to conspire.”²⁷ In Old French the word is represented as *conjurer* which means “to plot or exorcize.” In African spirituality in America the composition of conjuring was indeed a banning together by an unspoken oath and in many respects was a plot to usurp the powers held by Christian slavers. Europeans, and later Americans were both ignorant and obtuse to the complexities of African spirituality insomuch that they routinely mocked and were dismissive to what they considered were mere superstitions. C.C. Jones, while giving an analysis of slave conjure pronounced, “They believe in second-sight, in apparitions, charms, witchcraft, and in a kind of irresistible Satanic influence. The superstitions brought from Africa have not been wholly laid aside.”²⁸ Noted traveler Frederick Law Olmsted shared in the same misunderstandings of spiritual practices when he wrote in his narrative, “A goodly portion of them, I am told, “profess religion”, and are received into the fellowship of the churches; but it is evident, of the greater part even of these, that their idea of religion, and the standard of morality

²⁷ Oxford Latin Dictionary, Oxford English Press (Published Online)

²⁸ Jones, *Religious Instruction*, 127-8.

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which they deem consistent with a “profession” is of it, is very degraded.” He further marks his point by saying,

“That they are subject to intense excitements, often really maniacal...I cannot see that they indicate anything but a miserable system of superstition, the more painful that it employs some forms and words ordinarily connected with true Christianity.”²⁹

Indeed, slave conjure was neither absurd nor contemptible in the spirits of those who believed in its powers to perform various functions for certain desired outcomes. Planters, missionaries, and travelers often times neglected to comprehend the history and culture of slave conjure, insomuch as not cultivating a perspective as to how and why it was retained and maintained from the continent of Africa to the plantations of America. To the enslaved African who was familiar with conjuring, the significance was to be understood and respected. The conjure doctor, as W.E.B. DuBois eloquently described was the “healer of the sick, the interpreter of the unknown, the comforter of the sorrow, the supernatural avenger of wrong, and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people.”³⁰ To be fair, the central importance of the conjurer in the enslaved African’s life could not in any rudimentary sense be shared or appreciated by the master class because they were the oppressors, never the oppressed. To them, true Christian values and beliefs were threatened by witchcraft, superstition, and paganism. Yet for the enslaved African, as DuBois pointed out, conjurers were the healers, the interpreters, the protectors.

²⁹) Frederick Law Olmsted and Joseph Arnold Foster, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (Claremont: Scripps College, 1856) 114.; Harvey Wish, “American Slave Insurrections Before 1861” in *The Journal of Negro History* 22 (3): 299-320.

Slavery in the South; First-Hand Accounts of the Antebellum American Southland from Northern & Southern Whites, Negroes, & Foreign Observers (New York 1964) 201.

³⁰ W.E.B. DuBois *Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago, A.C. McClurg and Company, 1903) 159.

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Within the prism of slave conjuring was the conjure bag. The conjure doctor, who would also be known as the root doctor used the conjure bag in order to, as Jason R. Young puts it, “heal the sick, harm enemies, reveal the unknown, protect themselves [enslaved Africans] from the brutalities of slavery, and achieve countless other aims.”³¹ The conjure bag, which could also be known as tricks, charms, tobys, and hands were responsible for storing ritual objects. Root doctors who used medicines to heal the sick or perform special functions were known to either wrap or bind their medicines inside the bag or in some cases seal their medicines inside glass bottles. A conjure bag could consist of roots from the ground, pins, rusty nails, and dirt, with other contents being added depending upon the specializations of the conjure doctor. Louis Pendleton, writing in *Notes on Negro Folk-Lore and Witchcraft in the South* mentioned that in Louisiana, enslaved Africans constructed small human models, covered with blood and pierced through the heart.³² Also the conjure bag might have contained fingernails and hair which could be used to bring about harm or possibly even death upon the conjured.

On the plantations where there was a known conjure or root doctor, many slave masters maintained a distant relationship which translated into a sense of status and power within the minds of other slaves. Indeed, not every root doctor practiced the same way, and not everyone specialized in the same areas. However, as it pertained to the ever-teetering balance between African spirituality and European-American Christianity, the influence and power of the conjurer, as with others like herbalists, was embossed upon the sensibilities of the enslaved Africans. The relationship between planter and root doctor, herbalist or fortune teller was a contentious one, yet there are many accounts where the conjurer was so mesmerizing that he or

³¹ Young, *Rituals* 119.

³² Louis Pendleton “*Notes on Negro Folk-Lore and Witchcraft in the South*” JAF (July-September 1890) 206.

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she was able to avoid physical labor or even punishment. In his narrative, Henry Bibb spoke to this by saying,

There is much superstition among the slaves. Many of them believe in what they call "conjuration," tricking, and witchcraft; and some of them pretend to understand the art, and say that by it they can prevent their masters from exercising their will over their slaves. Such are often applied to by others, to give them power to prevent their masters from flogging them.³³

In relation to religion, those who had or had not converted to Christianity sought the protection and assistance of root doctors with no particular hesitation or regard for their spiritual beliefs. The overall impact that conjuring had upon the slave experience in America was that it stood as a formidable opponent to the structure of Christianity. Also, since the origins of conjuring derived from West and West-Central Africa, the enslaved African might have been more familiar with the ritual practice of conjuring as opposed to Christianity. Yet as African spirituality, due in part to conjuring, remained preeminent in the slave community, it would be Hoodoo which would be claimed by both Christian convert and ministers as well as non-convert alike.

Both Zora Neale Hurston's *Hoodoo in America* and associate professor of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice at Rutgers University at Camden Katrina Hazzard-Donald's recently released work *Mojo Workin': The Old African-American Hoodoo System* are two of the most detailed and comprehensive writings on the religion that helped to transcend the Lowcountry region of the United States. Touching upon a litany of subjects, terms, and persons, Hurston's description of Hoodoo articulated its nuances and was one of the first major works to

³³ Henry Bibb and Lucius C. Matlack *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* (New York: Published by the Author; 5 Spruce Street. 1849) 25.

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examine its rich history. Zora Neale Hurston explains, “Veaudeau is the European term for African magic practices and beliefs, but it is unknown to the American Negro. His own name for his practices is hoodoo, both terms being related to the West African term juju. "Conjure" is also freely used by the American Negro for these practices.”³⁴ Quite like the enslaved Africans from the areas where it originated, Hoodoo is one of the most complex and transformative religions which survived the slave experience in America. Versatile in its own right, Hoodoo however has been vastly misunderstood and misinterpreted by outside scholars who were not part of the culture which spawned Hoodoo.

In *Mojo Workin'*, Katrina Hazzard-Donald describes the reason for Hoodoo's emergence as a “dynamic spiritual form functioning at the boundaries of slavery's power” was due to the enslaved African's unwillingness to abandon all of the “traditional spiritual and worship practices” they carried with them from Africa.³⁵ The tenacity of the enslaved African to hold onto their spiritual identification was paramount to their daily lives and the circumambient efforts to protect their spirituality was one of the most reflective driving forces which birthed Hoodoo in America.

Hoodoo's presence and influence could be felt as it grew and manifested itself into the lives of enslaved Africans in the Lowcountry region. Hazzard-Donald explains that there were three southern regional Hoodoo traditions which were established somewhere between the late-eighteenth century and the early-nineteenth century. These areas were, the Southwest (Gulf Coast; New Orleans; Mobile, AL), Southeast (Sea Island, Coastal Georgia and Florida; the

³⁴ Zora N. Hurston “Hoodoo in America” *The Journal of American Folk Lore* (October-December 1931) 317.

³⁵ K.Hazzard-Donald *Mojo Workin': The Old African-American Hoodoo System* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press. University of Illinois Press, 2013) 35.

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Carolinas), and the Northeast (Maryland; Virginia; eastern Tennessee; North Carolina).³⁶ Within this large geographic area enslaved Africans developed and fortified Hoodoo despite the presence of Christianity. Indeed, Hoodoo emerged over time and through time (it is generally assumed between 1740 and 1780) Hoodoo's influence on the enslaved African expanded.

As opposed to Christianity, Hoodoo was not viewed as a contradictory, oppressive religion that was designed to impress upon the enslaved African that their bondage had been preordained. Also, Christianity stood opposite Hoodoo, as well as other traditional African religions because it was regulated via the slave master who decided when, where, and how enslaved Africans could worship. Finally, Christianity offered no realistic opportunity for liberation. If an enslaved African, who concluded in his or her mind that he or she would be in perpetual bondage for life, then it would be more than plausible that they would at the very least be morally obligated to worship the way in which they were able to in Africa. For this, Christianity prohibited enslaved Africans where religions like Hoodoo did not. Hoodoo provided many of the tenants of spiritual worship that had been utilized in Africa which included spirit possession, sacred circle dancing, sacrifice, ritual water immersion, and divination, to name a few.

African spiritual connectedness translated into Hoodoo through what was seen as the Hoodoo Christian Church where Hoodoonized Christianity would flourish among the congregation who fused Christianity with Hoodoo rituals. Many of the same practices of enslaved Africans who sought the depths of the woods in order to hold services through "invisible institutions" were also conducted inside the Hoodoo church. Dancing, prayer and healing, and spirit possessions were present within both Hoodoonized Christianity but also

³⁶ Ibid.,38

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“invisible institutions.” The profound influence that African spirituality carried inside the Hoodoo church was so impactful that in some instances, ministers of enslaved African churches left their position for Hoodoonized Christianity.³⁷

Conclusion

More can be said, and has been said about the influence that African spirituality had on the slave experience in America and thereby, the traditional religions of enslaved Africans. The belief that Christianity in America played a decisive factor in controlling the religious beliefs of enslaved Africans is a myth steep in Eurocentric doctrine and irresponsible neglect of history and facts. The consequence of this has been the rewarding of Christianity for circumstances it did not actually create. Up to the American Civil War the core values of Christianity were lost in a slave system designed, in part, to use religion as a means to oppress rather than liberate. It was preached as a vessel from the same persons who as Frederick Douglass said, “sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution.” In short, Christianity on the Southern plantations in America was as a means to justify a unilateral approach to a universal religion based solely on the premise that Christians were right and the rest of the world were heathens.

Yet forged from the bowels of despair, anger, sorrow and grief an enslaved people brought forth their respective spiritual and religious beliefs, worshipping under the ever-present threat of death itself, and creating for themselves a community within a community managed by the common bond that all men were indeed created equal by the Supreme Being. African spirituality meant much more to the enslaved African than Christianity could have standing on its

³⁷ Newbell N. Puckett, *Folk beliefs of the southern Negro*. (Chapel Hill; London: The University of North Carolina Press; H. Milford, 1926) 168-9. Puckett interview with informant no. 124, Alf Goodman, Columbus, Mississippi.

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own merits. The enslaved African was not void of the implications of professing that God on one hand loved them, and on the other condemned them to a life on bondage before they were even born. The hypocrisy in that ran rampant in the slave community and whether or not an enslaved African converted to Christianity, they never submitted their African spiritual identification.

As generations have passed and ancestors have returned back to their spiritual homes, the remnants of African spirituality live on through the songs, praise, worship, prayers and services held at Black churches every Sunday. From being forbidden to worship the Supreme Being as was divinely ordained, to risking one's life, to manipulating and influencing Christianity for the purposes of supplied hope and prospective rebellion, to finally being free to worship as one so chooses, indeed, African spirituality will never have an extinguished soul.